

(U) Ask Zelda!: Wrong Address

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) Note: The article below is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,

My friend's new boss just referred to her as "young lady," as in, "Nice work on the white paper, young lady." Several years ago I was in a job in which the GCM [Global Capabilities Manager] of the office I was in usually referred to women subordinate to him, including me, as "young lady." In fact, I wasn't younger than him--so the term clearly had no relation to age. To me, the use of "young lady" in that context was demeaning. Am I overly sensitive? What's the best way to counter this behavior? I'm guessing that

responding, "thanks, old man," although extremely satisfying, would be neither wise nor appropriate.

-- Not a "Young Lady"

Dear old gal middle-aged woman female employee of indeterminate age:

You are correct--the response "thanks, old man" would be both unwise and inappropriate; and no offense, but yes, I think that you are being overly sensitive.

It is very difficult to know what might offend someone, and it's particularly a minefield for men in the workplace when addressing female colleagues. While some things are obviously wrong (such as "baby" and "old broad"), there is a gray area where offense is in the mind of the beholder. Some women may like being called a "girl" or "young lady" because it makes them feel youthful, while others (like you) take offense and find it demeaning.

I believe this man's heart was in the right place. He knew many women are sensitive about their age, so he combined a compliment ("young") with a genteel/polite word for a female adult human ("lady")... and yet he was still wrong.

So what's a fella to do?

Using a person's name can be a safe option, as long as you know what they prefer to be called. For some, especially in a foreign country, use of their first name may seem too forward; while the Miss/Mrs./Ms. option opens up a whole other area in which to err. And the use of an unwanted nickname (don't ever call me Zel or Zeldie!) makes many bristle. For those who aren't so good at remembering names, "young lady" or "young man" may seem like an ideal alternative.

I could get into a whole philosophical discourse on the subject, including the use of "young lady" as a term of endearment or familiarity and the emotional echoes of being told, "Young lady, go to your room!" by an angry parent--but I'll leave those types of discussions to **the SIGINT Philosopher**.*

If this expression--or others--bothers you, I suggest **education is your best recourse**. The next

time a man calls you "young lady," let him know, in a nice way, how you would prefer he address you. If he asks what's wrong with "young lady" you can explain that while you're sure he didn't mean it this way, you find the phrase demeaning, and tell him why. I'm sure he will appreciate the insight and will do his best to comply with your wishes. But don't be surprised if you get dark looks from the other women in your office who miss being referred to as young ladies.

Feldt

* Just for the record, I would never put shoe polish on anyone's headphones--that would not be civil. And as for stealing a fruit cup from the break room... well, it might be a different story if we were talking about chocolate. 😊
